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Senior cornerback and four-year starter Michael Jenkins is on everybody's preseason All-American first team, and his leadership may be as important to this team as his talent. Jenkins is an early favorite for the Thorpe Award, but he didn't turn down NFL millions last winter with individual awards in mind. He came back to OSU to win a national championship, and his teammates can look to his selflessness and loyalty for inspiration this season.

Jenkins will eventually be paired with Donald Washington at the other cornerback spot, but first Washington and backup safety Jamario O'Neal will serve two game suspensions for unspecified rules violations. Another member of last year's defensive back group, Eugene Clifford, a heralded freshman safety in 2007, was unable to manage team and academic requirements, and is no longer with the program.

Even with the casualties permanent and temporary, the Buckeyes are loaded in the defensive backfield, and especially at corner. Sophomore Chimdi Chekwa and junior Andre Amos are arguably the next two cornerbacks on the depth chart. Chekwa will probably start in Washington's spot for the YSU and Ohio U. games, and after Washington returns, he'll be the fifth DB on the field when the defense goes to the 'nickel' package. Shaun Lane is a versatile and reliable senior corner, and sophomore Devon Torrence has been moved back to cornerback from wide receiver for the 2008 season. Donnie Evege comes off a redshirt season in 2007 to give that group even more depth. The Buckeyes added just one cornerback in the incoming freshman class, but Travis Howard has already made a positive impression.

At safety, 2007 starters Kurt Coleman and Anderson Russell are both back as juniors in 2008. Both are in better physical condition than last year, when Russell was in his first season back off of major knee surgery. Strong safety Coleman has added 15 pounds of muscle to go with a year of starting experience, and both players are more comfortable in their roles in Jim Heacock's defense. The play of the safeties was an area the team wanted to improve coming off the 2007 campaign, and all indications are that the Buckeye starters are primed to make that happen.

Backing up Coleman and Russell at safety are Jamarion O'Neal and Aaron Gant, and Nick Patterson and Nate Oliver also figure to get playing time as reserves. Rocco Pentello returns after a redshirt year as a freshman, and Zach Domicone and Orhian Johnson are two incoming freshman who could very well be candidates for redshirt seasons.

Here's a closer look at the 2008 Ohio State defensive backs:

Cornerbacks:

Projected Starters:

[Malcolm Jenkins](#) - #2 - Senior; 6' 1" ; 201 lbs. Piscataway (NJ) Township H.S.

Jenkins was not a household name in Ohio recruiting circles when Jim Tressel reached into New Jersey and came away with a commitment from the all-state

football and track star from Piscataway. But Jenkins quickly showed the coaches that he was something special, and earned a starting spot at nickel back as a true freshman in 2005, and started three games at cornerback as well. By the end of his sophomore year in 2006, Jenkins was a consensus All Big Ten pick, and after last year's junior season, the All-American awards began piling up for the Buckeye corner.

Jenkins surprised most Buckeyes observers when he announced just days after the LSU game that he would be returning to play his senior season at OSU. Already touted as one of the top cornerbacks in the country, Jenkins would certainly have been a first-round selection in the NFL Draft. He was quoted that day as saying that "there are some things you just can't put a price on", and many of those things await Jenkins in his senior year in Columbus. For one, he has been named a Captain for the 2008 Buckeyes.

NFL scouts love Jenkins' size-speed combination, and he is known for his confidence and overall toughness on the field. He typically is assigned to cover the opponent's best receiver, and practically begs the coaches to play schemes that allow him more opportunities for one-on-one coverage. Malcolm Jenkins' name will soon be added to the long list of OSU cornerbacks (Winfield, Springs, Clements, Gamble) to excel playing on Sundays. But for now...enjoy him in Scarlet and Gray.

[Donald Washington](#) - #20 - RS Junior; 6' 1" 194 lbs. (Indianapolis, IN)
Franklin Central H.S.

Washington will be watching the Buckeyes play their first two games of 2008, but after he serves his suspension, he'll be back manning the field side cornerback position where he started all 13 games in 2007. He enters his third season as a starter for Ohio State, after redshirting in his true freshman season in 2005. Washington played his way into the starting nickel back position in 2006 and backed up All-Big Ten selection Antonio Smith that year.

Washington is remembered for his momentum-changing recovery of a fumble down near the OSU goal line early in the Texas game in 2006. His return out to midfield turned what looked like a possible 7-0 deficit into an eventual 7-0 lead for the Bucks. He took over as the full-time starter at corner in 2007, and has been a reliable performer ever since. The recent trend at OSU is a preference for big physical cornerbacks, and Washington fits the bill. He was a state champion in the

long jump in high school, and his speed, leaping ability and overall athleticism are his trademarks. Paired with Jenkins, Washington gives the Bucks one of the best sets of cornerbacks in the nation.

Reserves:

[Andre Amos](#) - #13 - RS Junior; 6' 1" 183 lbs. Middletown (OH) H.S.

Amos is a player who has truly paid his dues as a Buckeye. He came into Ohio State in 2005, and took a redshirt year, eventually getting a chance to play in 2006, when he contributed on special teams and backed up Jenkins. It looked like 2007 would be his breakout year, as he appeared ready to challenge for significant playing time at the nickel back and the cornerback positions. But an ACL tear in Spring ball led to knee surgery and a long rehab that cost him a good portion of the 2007 season. He did manage to beat the predicted recovery time though, and saw action late in the year.

Amos is listed on the depth chart as one of the first two backup cornerbacks behind Jenkins and Washington, and he also has a chance to contribute at the nickel spot in 2008. He is a strong, sure tackler, with excellent speed and good ball skills. He had an excellent Spring Game this year, performing as well as any defensive back on the field. Andre Amos looks like he's ready to make up for lost time.

[Chimdi Chekwa](#) - #5 - RS Sophomore; 6' 0" 188 lbs. (Clermont, FL) East Ridge H.S.

Chekwa came on strong for the Buckeyes in 2007 after spending his true freshman year as a redshirt in 2006. He was one of Tressel's 'under the radar' recruits when he committed to OSU in December of 2005, and he looks now like another success that confirms the OSU staff's keen eye for DB talent. Chekwa will start at the cornerback position opposite Jenkins in the Buckeyes' first two games of 2008, replacing the suspended Washington, and it's not inconceivable that Washington could have a tough time getting his starting job back. More likely though is that Chekwa will play the nickel back, or "Star" position, when the Buckeyes go to a fifth DB. He has excellent speed (10.79 in the 100M in high school) and has proven to be a strong tackler and a fierce competitor. With Amos and Chekwa as the first two corners off the bench, the Buckeyes look to be as deep at the corner spots as they have been in recent memory.

[Shaun Lane](#) - #29 - RS Senior; 5' 10" ; 175 lbs. Hubbard (OH) H.S.

The depth at cornerback is more than four-deep for the 2008 Bucks, as they can rely on redshirt senior Shaun Lane to play significant minutes without a dropoff in production. Lane is the son of former OSU defensive back and kick returner Garcia Lane, but he made a name for himself as an all-state player at Hubbard, playing both ways at running back and defensive back. He spent some time at running back for the Buckeyes too, but ultimately returned to the defensive backfield where he started his OSU career. Lane hasn't been able to crack the starting lineup during his time in Columbus, but he has been a valuable contributor on special teams, and a solid performer as a backup corner.

[Devon Torrence](#) - #10 - Sophomore; 6' 1" ; 193 lbs. Canton (OH) South H.S.

It would be understandable if Devon Torrence feels a bit dizzy these days. The multi-talented athlete from Canton has not only bounced around from position to position in his young Buckeye career, but he has also bounced back and forth from football to professional baseball over the past two years. After committing to play football for Jim Tressel and the Buckeyes, he was drafted by the Houston Astros organization in the 16th round of the June 2007 draft. Not sure yet where his future lay, he worked a compromise with the OSU coaches and the Astros' people that allowed him to play both sports. He reported to the Astros' Class A affiliate and played six weeks of pro baseball before reporting to OSU football camp in August, 2007.

Coming in to Columbus as a defensive back, he switched over to offense as a wide receiver early last season, but is now back at cornerback for the 2008 campaign. The Astros are reportedly trying to give Torrence enough incentive to commit to a full-time baseball career in order to fully develop him as a prospect. The playing time he receives and the on-field results he produces in 2008 will go a long way toward making that ultimate career decision.

[Donnie Evege](#) - #30 - RS Freshman; 5' 11" ; 189 lbs. (Huber Hts, OH) Wayne H.S.

Evege did not play as a true freshman in 2007, taking a redshirt season to work with the scout team. He has excellent speed and coverage skills, but finds himself well back in an extremely talented group of cornerbacks at the moment. He will

probably be used on some of the special teams as he competes for playing time on the defense.

[Travis Howard](#) - #18 - Freshman; 6' 1" 180 lbs. (Miami, FL) Dr. Michael M. Krop H.S.

Howard was a high school teammate of another 2008 OSU freshman, linebacker Etienne Sabino, who enrolled early this Spring and got a head start on his friend as a Buckeye. But Howard didn't waste any time making an impression on the OSU coaches once he arrived on campus. Practice observers have said he has stood out as one of the bigger surprises of summer workouts. The biggest obstacle to playing time for Howard is the long list of experienced players ahead of him. And one factor that may help him avoid redshirting is the large and talented group of DB's coming in next Fall in the class of 2009.

Safeties:

Projected Starters:

[Anderson Russell](#) - #21 - RS Junior; 6' 0" 205 lbs. (Atlanta, GA) Marist School

Russell earned All Big Ten honors for his 2007 season at free safety for the Bucks. He had 63 tackles and three sacks on the season, and returns for his third season as a starter. Russell redshirted in 2005 as a true freshman, and worked his way into the starting lineup by the second game of the 2006 season. But five games into the 2006 slate, he tore an ACL and missed the rest of the Buckeyes' undefeated regular season.

The safeties are aiming for more consistent play in 2008, which includes coming up with more turnovers. Russell took some heat from his teammates for dropping a number of possible interceptions last year, and the coaches are emphasizing making those catches with all the DB's this season. It is often said that a player really needs a full season of action in order to get back to 100% following a major knee injury of the sort suffered by Russell. This year's summer practices give every reason to believe that Anderson Russell will be all the way back for the 2008 season.

[Kurt Coleman](#) - #4 - Junior; 5' 11" 196 lbs. (Clayton, OH) Northmont H.S.

Coleman returns for his second year as the starter for the Buckeyes at strong safety, and like Russell, he is focusing on making more big plays for the OSU defense in 2008. Though he had 64 tackles to rank third on the team last year, he had no interceptions, and like his safety running mate Russell, he had several passes slip right through his hands. Coleman is a gifted athlete who figures to be more comfortable in the position with a year of experience, and more able to react instinctively to the action, letting his ability take over. He has also come in to the 2008 season having worked very hard in the offseason, putting on 15 pounds of muscle to his 2007 playing weight of 180 lbs. Already known for his ability to make the big hit, a bigger, more experienced Kurt Coleman will be a force to be reckoned with in the Buckeye backfield this season.

Reserves:

[Jamario O'Neal](#) - #3 - Senior; 6' 0" 205 lbs. (Cleveland, OH) Glenville H.S.

O'Neal will be finishing up his Ohio State career this year, and although things have not gone the way he anticipated when he arrived with a 'can't miss' label out of Glenville High School, he is doing his best to remain positive and make a contribution to the team in his final season. As it turns out, that season will begin two games late for the senior safety, as he serves a two-game suspension for an undisclosed violation of team rules. In summer practices, however, O'Neal had worked his way into the lead for the 'Star' position, a hybrid role assigned to the fifth defensive back in certain defensive alignments for the OSU defense. O'Neal still possesses rare athletic talent, and his attitude for the season is upbeat and team-oriented, despite the looming suspension. It would be a great story if his hard work and positive approach were rewarded with a meaningful and successful conclusion to his OSU career.

[Aaron Gant](#) - #8 - Junior; 6' 0" 194 lbs. (Orchard Lake, MI) St. Mary Preparatory School

Gant enters his junior year as the backup to Kurt Coleman for the 2008 season. As a true freshman in 2006, he contributed on special teams and played his way into the backup role at free safety. Again in 2007, as a sophomore, Gant was a

second-teamer behind Anderson Russell. He has good size and strength, and is a big hitter in the secondary. He has had limited opportunities for meaningful playing time in his career so far, but that could change this season, as he has demonstrated a grasp of the defensive scheme, and could be in the rotation for lots of action.

[Nate Oliver](#) - #14 - RS Freshman; 6' 0" 215 lbs. (Lakewood, OH) St. Edward H.S.

Oliver is a promising young safety prospect who took a redshirt year in his true freshman season last year, and worked hard to add weight and strength to prepare for his Big Ten career. Oliver was a nationally ranked recruit out of St. Ed's as a prep player, and was the first commitment for the OSU recruiting class of 2007. He had a very good showing in the Spring Game this April, the first opportunity for Buckeye fans to see him play. Look for Oliver to play a big role on the special teams units this Fall, and to see some action with the second team defense.

[Nick Patterson](#) - #23 - RS Senior; 6' 1" 209 lbs. (Florissant, MO) Hazelwood Central H.S.

Patterson is a three-year letterman, whose contributions have come mostly on special teams, and as a reserve at both safety positions. He briefly cracked the starting lineup in his sophomore season, but has not been able to get back to the first team since. He is likely to continue as primarily a special teams player in his final season as a Buckeye.

[Rocco Pentello](#) - #25 - RS Freshman; 6' 0" 194 lbs. Westerville (OH) South H.S.

Pentello put up big numbers as a two-way starter at quarterback and safety for Westerville South, twice earning all-state honors in the process. He comes to OSU with a lot to learn about the safety position, but he has a good blend of size and speed and, as the son of a football coach, he has a good understanding of the game. Pentello took a redshirt year in 2007, and this season figures to make his mark on the special teams.

[Zach Domicone](#) - #16 - Freshman; 6' 3" 215 lbs. Beavercreek (OH) H.S.

Zach is another backup safety for the Buckeyes who played quarterback in high school because of his versatility and overall athletic ability. He possesses excellent speed (4.5) and size, and could project as a linebacker before his OSU career is over. A late signee with OSU, Domicone had offers from Nebraska and Oklahoma before committing to the Buckeyes. As an incoming freshman on a 2008 OSU team with so much experience at safety, Domicone is a likely candidate for a redshirt season, barring injuries above him on the depth chart.

[Orhian Johnson](#) - #19 - Freshman; 6' 2" 178 lbs. (Gulfport, FL) Boca Ciega H.S.

Although he was recruited as a safety by the Buckeyes, Johnson is yet another defensive back prospect who excelled in high school as a quarterback as well as a DB. His athletic ability could lead to a move to a wide receiver position at some point, but the most likely outcome for Johnson in 2008 is a redshirt season to help add weight and muscle.

This article is one installment in a series on the 2008 Buckeyes. Read the others at the links below:

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Offensive Line](#)

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Running Backs](#)

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Quarterbacks](#)

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Wide Receivers](#)

[Meet the 2008 Buckeyes: Fullbacks and Tight Ends](#)

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